Essay

Reimagine Education in Regina

Whitney Blaisdell
University of Regina

Technology has given our society convenience and efficiency. Yet, the structure of North American high schools has been virtually the same for decades. The model of one teacher lecturing to many students has been the primary experience of formal education. Now, with the Internet holding the answers to most questions answered in school, it is time that our high schools across North America reflect this growing change and allow students to learn in a more efficient way. I would like to invite all educators—prospective and experienced—to consider broader options for teaching high school students. I propose that we try a new structure for schools that may enable students to engage in learning in and outside of the classroom while still allowing time to fulfill the commitments that currently take them away from school. I am not focusing on simply adapting the current school system that we have, but instead completely re-imagining it.

Re-imagining high school education is important because, as of 2010, 28% of students in Regina were not graduating from high school within four years of entering it (Ministry of Education). That is, over a quarter of students in Regina are failing, meaning that as educators we are failing our students. I certainly do not mean to imply that teachers currently in the field are inadequate. I am merely an entry-level teacher, and, through the admittedly small amount of teaching experience I have had, teachers I have worked with have been excited, inventive, intelligent people who consistently challenge the current norms of North American education and are implementing innovative teaching practices in their classrooms.

The issue is therefore not that teachers are inadequate, nor that the curriculum is now irrelevant; rather, the way school is taught is not as applicable to our students in the current technological environment. Students learn through the content we teach, but also through how we teach it. We want to foster creativity and critical thinking skills in our students, but it is extremely difficult to simply teach these skills. Instead, we could exhibit creativity and critical

examination by implementing creative educational structures that criticize the norm. A re-imagined structure of education would oblige students to bear witness to creativity at the hands of their educators and role models, and in turn compel youth to exhibit those qualities.

I encourage dialogue among the strong educators who have contemplated this long before my entrance into the field, and I support further re-imagining the means through which we educate. Many teachers are aware of the concept of *flipped classrooms,* wherein students watch their lectures for homework and come to class for stimulating discussions and activities (Knewton, 2014). Classrooms are thus *flipped* because students get the lecture at home and do the activities pertaining to it in class, rather than getting the lecture in class and doing the activities pertaining to it outside of class. This model benefits teachers and students because students attend class having already covered the material, allocating classroom time to support students' genuine understanding of the content. There is a greater time-allowance for one-on-one work with students and teachers, and for student collaboration, both of which have been shown to greatly increase student success (Deloughry, 1995). With the current school structure of classroom lecture and homework activities, students often feel frustrated or discouraged trying to understand content and homework outside of class.

I have seen the flipped classroom model implemented in many schools, and it appears to have thus far yielded positive results. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to visit New Design High School, a community school in New York City where Principal Scott Conti has been implementing flipped classrooms for years. Through speaking to Conti and his students, it became obvious that this model does work. Students feel empowered by this method of education, and at-risk students are reclaimed. Conti shared an inspiring belief with us during our visit, saying that if we "change a school, we change a neighbourhood", and through his impassioned and original work he has successfully brought this belief to life.

The flipped classroom makes room for another model that could work as an original alternative to our current school configuration. High school students could attend class for three hours a day, in the morning (9-12), afternoon (1-4), or evening (7-10), where they would have discussions, do their activities to check their understanding, and be expected to come to class with an understanding of the content. My particular experience and passion working with vulnerable communities leads me to believe that this model would especially appeal to at-risk students. Teachers know that rarely do students fail because they are unintelligent but rather

because they are not doing their work. Some students, and especially those in vulnerable communities, are working full-time, have children that need caring for at home, are caring for sick relatives, or have other commitments that are more important to them than their education. This model is flexible enough to permit youth to acquire a high school education while completing other commitments. Many teachers who have worked with students with children understand that these young parents often struggle to attend classes. Though they care greatly and want an education, it becomes too difficult, childcare is far too expensive, and of course they choose caring for their children over attending school. Schools give these parents virtually no choice but to fail. This model of education may appeal to those students who would be much more likely to find care for their children for 3 hours in the evening than 8 hours of the day. Listening to lectures, watching instructional videos, and/ or reading is a smaller burden on students as they could do their work from anywhere with Internet access, and this model is less time-costly than the current structure.

This 3-hour model therefore solves another problem that affects our students. Rather than expecting learners to attend school for close to seven hours, do homework daily, and often work between 20-40 hours a week, this model could potentially enable students to commit fewer than 8 hours per day towards studies. Within 8 hours, students could gain the required information, and attend school for interactive learning and assignments. Consequently, their remaining time could be used to fulfill their other requirements, such as working to provide for themselves and their families, which potentially pulls students away from graduating within four years of the currently demanding high school system.

Students of any economic class could benefit from this model. High school students are currently in school for approximately 6.5 hours per day, often work at least part-time, and have homework. If a student even does five hours of homework per week and works just 15 hours part-time, she is stacked with a 55-hour workweek. In my experience, five hours of homework per week is very light for most successful high-school students, and most students are working more than 15 hours a week. We are easily requiring many students, therefore, to commit to 50-75 hour weeks. This means that if our students dropped out of high school to work these hours at minimum wage even with no overtime pay, they would be making $500- $750 per week. This is simply too great a temptation to the many Saskatchewan students who live below the poverty line.

I do not intend to make this model appeal exclusively to learners and educators in impoverished communities. Simply, Regina's population living below the poverty line is greater than the national average, whereas the cost of living continues to rise (Poverty Free Saskatchewan, 2010). Truthfully, these students are more likely to fail than those who are affluent (Bruenig, 2012). This model could greatly increase their chances of succeeding in school, graduating from high school, and contributing to society in the future thus reducing poverty in the city. Flipped classrooms also help prepare students for post-secondary schools where they are expected to do readings before a lecture. Students are much better off having an understanding of the content before they sit through a fast-paced, unforgiving 3-hour lecture.

The 3-hour model would also encourage creativity in all students and appeal to those with different learning styles. Educators could find or create various electronic resources that would appeal to different learners. Such students could do interactive videos, watch tutorials to work along with, do readings, or listen to lectures. As mentioned, if a teacher could not find a matching resource, he or she would have the freedom to record his or her own. This model would eliminate pacing problems, as what may be repetition for one student in a live lecture is often being stated too quickly for another to fully grasp. In a video-based setting, students would be able to take breaks, pause, and rewind as often as they want. Further they could both listen to a lecture and do a reading or activity to increase their understanding. Educators could make all in-class resources available for download on student devices so that before tests and other methods of evaluation, they would also be available for reviewing.

On the topic of tests and evaluation, many of these could also be completed electronically. Timed math or multiple choice tests usually make for simple assessments which can be easily evaluated by a computer, the results of which can be sent to the teacher and students for immediate review. Since this model eliminates some tedious marking, educators become free to spend time marking more authentic student work and finding creative ways to make this model work better for them and their students. Consequently, this 3-hour model with an independent component can make teaching, assessing, and learning more efficient.

As explained, this model has the potential to benefit both educators and learners and to greatly increase students' capacity to engage in learning while having time for the commitments that often take them away from school. That being said, I understand the conceivable weaknesses of this proposition. Some think it is students' lack of motivation that contributes to failure in high

school, and if this is the case, they are even less likely to succeed if they are expected to do three hours of independent study before class. I have also heard an opinion that the current high school schedule imposes a necessary structure on students from vulnerable communities that they otherwise lack, and therefore helps them to succeed. Not only does this new model still implicate structure, but it is also my experience that imposing high expectations on at-risk students—such as independent study—increases their confidence and consequently their performance in school. Though there are certainly challenges with this proposed model, its potential could never be realized unless it is trialed.

My attachment does not lie with my particular proposed model, rather with the necessity of change and the potential benefits it brings. I want schools to take advantage of technology that goes beyond using social media and technology in their classrooms. Because of its potential for efficiency, my biggest hope would be for teachers to find a way for technology to help decrease the time commitment of high schools.

This is a call to educators to not only continue being innovative, but to truly implement new ideas. The gifts technology has imposed upon our society, combined with growing problems with our current school structure, necessitate an immediate change. Rather than continue to make small changes in an attempt to improve the current structure of high school education in North America, I truly believe there is great necessity for a complete re-imagining of education. The importance of a paradigm shift has never been more apparent.

References

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